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The Baweans of Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

This paper is part of my PhD research at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. It focuses on the third and fourth generation of descendants of a group of immigrants that left the Bawean Island in the Java Sea for the French Colony Indochina around 1900. This paper introduces this group of Muslims currently living in the Center of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. The members of this religious community are transnationally active and see themselves, at one and the same time, as “*orang Bawean*” or Bawean people, and as Vietnamese or even Cham, and as good Muslims. They live around one of the first mosques built in Ho Chi Minh City informally called the “*thanh duong Malai*” or Malay temple. Some 60 of its members did not have any citizenship since they day they were born in what is currently known as Vietnam. In 2003 these people suddenly applied for Vietnamese citizenship. This presentation looks into the reasons for this decision and the implications it had for the Vietnamese state officials. It deals with questions of assimilation, influences of transnational religious contacts and the interaction between these “Baweans” and the state officials in a country that is hardly known for its pro-active approach when it comes to matters of citizenship or religion.

Hidir and I were sitting outside the mosque in the center of Hồ Chí Minh City looking at the Friday afternoon traffic. We were discussing his request for Vietnamese citizenship. Smoke drifted past us. It came from the *halal* chicken grilled behind us in the food-stalls erected against the mosque’s gate and it enveloped a car with diplomatic plates as it pulled away from the curb and into a swarm of motorcycles. Usually the Indonesian Consul-General would stay for lunch after the Friday afternoon prayer. Sometimes he would invite one of the Muslims living around the mosque to join him for a meal because he feels connected to these people who share his religion and his country of origin, but not today. Hidir nodded his head at the car and commented,

He was no help to us at all when we applied for Indonesian citizenship. We told him, ‘In Vietnam we are classified as aliens but no foreign country accepts us as citizens. We cannot hold land titles or Vietnamese identity papers. We have not been accepted in universities, we have never been accepted for governmental jobs and we have not been able to leave the country legally. Still even today some of us have actively chosen not to register with the police or apply for Vietnamese citizenship. We want to ask you to help us become Indonesian citizens again.’ But he was no help to us, that one¹.

Hidir’s comment brings us to some of the main issues presented in this article: labels of ethnic classification, citizenship and the ways people have tried to find a way to deal with these labels. In this article I present the Baweans, a *Sunni* Muslim immigrant community in Vietnam of the western Malayo-Polynesian Austronesian language group².

¹ Interview with Hidir, June, 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City, All interviewees’ names have been changed for the sake of anonymity

² Darrell Tyron, “Proto-Austronesian and the Major Austronesian Subgroups,” *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, (Peter Bellwood, James. J. Fox, and Darrell Tyron, Canberra: Department of

Little is known of what has become of this small migrant group in post-colonial Vietnam, even less of it is known as a Muslim minority in a security-conscious state post- 9/11. The people in this group have lived under the Vietnamese state's radar screen as stateless citizens. In 2001, sixty elderly men and women within this group decided to apply for Vietnamese citizenship. They knew that as a result, state officials would have to fit them into the existing classificatory grid. But even in 2002, these people still had not been classified nor did they have legal citizenship.

Charles Keyes notes, "ethnic classification has been as an instrument of power ... by modern states to fit in the "motley crowds" located on their frontiers"³. In this article I present a case study of one of these "motley crowds". Yet the Bawean people do not live on geographical "frontiers". Rather, and as they have done for the past hundred and fifty years, they live in the central business district of the country's economic hub. They do, however, exist on the fringes of formal classification and in many cases they do so willingly. They often chose for their children to remain stateless up to a certain age, as I will explain below.

This article shows that official ethnic classification as an instrument of power may blow an authoritative tune, but that it is not always listened to. When people wish to evade such classification they find ways to achieve that and when they decide to make use of such an instrument of power for their own benefit they will try and do so.

We suggest that over the past decade Vietnamese governmental institutions have become less restrictive with Muslim communities in Vietnam. Some scholars have even called the Vietnamese State's relations with its minorities relatively enlightened compared to global standards⁴. This is quite remarkable if we note that in East and Southeast Asia, relations between Muslim majorities and non-Muslim minorities (Indonesia, Malaysia) and between Muslim minorities and non-Muslim majorities (the Philippines, Thailand, China) are under stress⁵ and often result in stricter governmental control or even abuses such as have taken place in Pattani, in southern Thailand. In Vietnam, governmental institutions do not actively set out to classify or control Muslim communities forcing them into the grid of fifty-four formally classified ethnic groups. In the Bawean case, this tolerance almost borders on indifference, but when state agents were confronted with the Bawean request for citizenship that Vietnamese law until then had not yet encountered, they suddenly act serviceable, even amiable. Before I present the case study I will provide some historic background information on the Bawean.

Who are the Baweans?

This article presents a case study based on fieldwork that lasted from 2000 to 2005. To describe the community's experiences from their arrival in Saigon around 1880 up to the present, in detail goes beyond the scope of this article. They are descendants of people from

Anthropology Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1995): 17-35.

According to Tyron, the Austronesian language family is very large, with some 1200 languages and approximately 270 million speakers... It ranges from languages with tens of millions of speakers (Malay/Indonesian, Javanese, Tagalog) to a surprisingly large number of languages with only a handful of speakers numbered in the hundreds. Austronesian languages are spoken from Madagascar in the west to Easter Island in the east. They are spoken almost universally in Indonesia and the Philippines, in Singapore and Malaysia, by the indigenous population of Taiwan and by minority populations in Vietnam, Cambodia and the Mergui Archipelago off the coast of Myanmar.

³ Charles F. Keyes "'The Peoples of Asia': Science and politics in the classification of ethnic group in Thailand, China, and Vietnam" *Journal of Asian Studies* (2002): 1163-1203, 1174

⁴ Terry A. Rambo, "Vietnam," *Ethnicity in Asia, Asia's Transformations* (M. Selden, London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002): 109-135

⁵ Leif Manger, *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts* (Richmond: Curzon, 1990)

Bawean Island north of Madura in the Java Sea. These islanders came to Indochina from the Netherlands East Indies as early as the nineteenth century. They now form an Austronesian *Sunni* Muslim immigrant community in Vietnam. Their migration was firstly prompted by socio-economic motivations. They wished to escape the repressive Dutch colonial indentured labour system⁶. Secondly, emigration was a structural cultural element of Bawean culture also known as *merantau* [emigration]⁷. Thirdly, their migration was indirectly the result of their religious beliefs. Muslims, men and women, who could afford it, would travel to Mecca as pilgrims. On the way to Mecca and back, their ships would cast anchor in what is currently known as Singapore. Some individuals would stay on either to make some money before venturing on a pilgrimage or for their return home afterwards. Some travelled along the Mekong River working for Chinese businessmen and tried to find a job in Saigon once they arrived⁸. Later, during the colonial period, stories about life in Indochina where the French Colonial Administration welcomed non-locals attracted them. As a result some Bawean people travelled from what is Singapore's harbour today to Saigon over sea, by river or over land.

Around 1850 some three hundred men had settled on the banks of a small branch of the Saigon River. The newly arrived Bawean migrants constructed their first houses from wood with thatched roofs on the banks of the river. Little is known about their life prior to and during the colonial period in Indochina. Informants recall their parents telling them how the French officials actively provided them with a variety of jobs such as security guards, custom officials and construction workers⁹. From documents still in their possession I can conclude that upon arrival in Saigon the French government officially labelled them with the cover term *Malais*.

Certain branches of the colonial administration used cover-terms to structure and control the colonial society. The earlier French colonial government had such trouble classifying people that contemporary authors already complained about these inaccuracies. *Malais* for example was an ethnic cover term and its intended use was for people from the areas now known as Indonesia and Malaysia. As an ethnonym it did not describe someone's national or citizenship status. Confusingly enough, in many cases local officials classified people from other areas as *Malais* as well. Antoine Cabaton, wrote that often state officials made no distinction between *Malais* or *Cham*¹⁰. Marcel Ner complained that it was difficult to get a precise count of the number of alien Muslims and Arabs living in Indochina because the statistics and regulations used by the colonial administration often added them to the groups that were classified as *Indien* which also had people of Hindu persuasion.

This structural inaccurate identification and allotment of individuals to certain categories was even formalised in colonial administrative law. Different groups or congregations of immigrants in Indochina had to fit into:

- 1 les Chinois: Les congrégations de Canton, Foukien, Tvhieu-Tchao, Hakas, Hainam.
- 2 les Indiens: celle des Musulmans et celle des Bouddhistes.
- 3 les Malais, les Javanais, et les Arabes

⁶ Malte Stokhof, Javanese in Hochiminh city today: an Aftermath of Coolie Migration in French Colonial Vietnam? (MA Thesis: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002)

⁷ Jakob Vredendregt, De Baweanners in hun moederland en in Singapore: Een bijdrage tot de kulturele antropologie van zuidoost-Azie, (PhD dissertation Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1968)

⁸ Fieldnotes, June 2001, Hochiminh City

⁹ Marcel Ner, "Les Musulmans de L'Indochine Française" Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extreme-Orient vol. XXXVII (1937): 152-198

¹⁰ Antoine Cabaton, "Les malais de L' Indochine française," Revue Indochinoise (1912): 163-171

4 les autres Asiatiques étrangers et assimilés¹¹.

These congregations forcibly grouped people of different language-families indiscriminately together. They were based partially on the geographical area of origin such as is the case with the first two congregations. *Malais* as an ethnic cover term was to play an important part in the lives of these people and their descendants as we shall see in greater detail later.

There were other Muslim communities in Saigon and most of them built mosques claiming to be the first in Saigon¹². It is not clear who were actually the first to start building a mosque in Saigon. Documents found in the Archives in Hồ Chí Minh City indicate that a congregation of Muslims from what is Pakistan and India today had received land where they had started building a mosque even before the Bawean but it took them years to finish the project. The Bawean claim to have built their mosque in 1885 and they may well have completed the construction of their mosque before the other communities¹³. Their temple was called the *Chùa Mã Lai* [Malay Temple] up to 1972 but as some elderly men interviewed in 2001 recall,

We wanted to change that name because we are of Indonesian origin, not Malaysian. Around 1973 we changed the name after a major mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia¹⁴.

In the interview it was clear that the informant interpreted *Mã Lai* as Malaysia. With that change of name they reaffirmed their connection with their country of origin.

The first generations tried to keep in touch with their relatives overseas either in their country of origin or with the people living in what is currently Singapore. As time passed on, these contacts slowly lessened and eventually most of the relations with fellow Bawean abroad died off. From their first arrival in 1880 to 1976 people from Bawean and other origins arrived and settled around their mosque in Saigon. Some returned.

Most of the first migrants were men and they married local and non-local Muslims. Some married non-Muslims under the condition that they would convert to Islam. There was also a small contingent of Javanese manual labourers in Saigon but the Bawean community did not interact with them¹⁵. Children born from marriages were considered Bawean and if someone within the community passed away, he was buried at a cemetery in Saigon that was in the care of a Bawean immigrant who lived on the plot with his family.

Later, during the Vietnam War President Ngô Đình Diệm's Regime strove for a more monolithic Vietnamese society¹⁶. During his regime this process of forced ethnic simplification and formalisation of the indigenous population that had been started under the French continued to be applied. Classifications of foreigners by earlier governments were often uncritically accepted and their ethnonyms were translated into Vietnamese or English versions. For the Bawean who decided to register, this meant that they were now no longer

¹¹ René Deschamps, *La main-d' Oeuvre en Indo-Chine et L'immigration étrangère*, (PhD dissertation: Université de Poitiers, 1908)

¹² Marcel Ner, "Les Musulmans de L'Indochine Française" *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extreme-Orient* vol. XXXVII (1937): 152-198

¹³ *Commisariat de la Police des Ports de Saigon Cholon, 1933, Goucoch divers 2995 Note sur l'affaire de la mosquée de Saigon*, Vietnam National Archives II (VNA-II), Hồ Chí Minh City. This document deals with quarrels over money in the 'Indian Mosque' and mentions that in 1863 the colonial government assigned land to the 'Congrégation de Indiens Musulmans' [the congregation of Indian Muslims].

¹⁴ Interview with hakim of mosque, July, 2001, Hồ Chí Minh City

¹⁵ Malte Stokhof, *Javanese in Hochiminh city today: an Aftermath of Coolie Migration in French Colonial Vietnam?* (Ma thesis: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002)

¹⁶ Rie Nakamura, *Cham in Vietnam: Dynamics of Ethnicity*, (PhD dissertation: University of Washington, 1999)

Malais, but had become *Malay*. It should be stressed at this point that this word was still used as an ethnic cover term.

Around 1976, the community had around two thousand people living close or directly next to the mosque. Based on interviews taken from 2000 to 2006, the current number of people with Bawean origins is approximately two thousand. This is an estimate because it has become increasingly difficult to count these individuals because firstly not all descendants of this group wish to be known as Bawean, secondly I cannot base our census on papers because of the lack of proper documentation or the confusing ethnonyms or nationality stated on those documents. Another point is that not all Bawean wish to come out of the woodwork to present themselves for a census.

Reunification of Vietnam, a Scramble for Papers

In 1976, after the Second Indochina War the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam gave people of non-Vietnamese nationality permission to repatriate and many who wished to escape the new regime tried to leave the country. Those people with alien status that stayed behind were asked to re-register at the local police offices. From interviews I learned that people were well aware that their future partly depended on how the new state officials would appreciate and interpret their old identity papers. Most people had no proper documentation and this now led to questions and concerns about the ethnic and national categorization the new administration might have in store for them. Ahmed, an elderly guard who claims to have worked for both the French and the Americans puts it in plain words,

We had no papers because, before, we could do without them. My parents experienced many governments, the Dutch government in Indonesia, the government of Singapore, the French, the Japanese and many different governments before the unification of Vietnam. Of course many of us did not learn of the regulations [of various governments] for these kinds of documents. Anyway we never intended to stay forever. We have also been through three wars and during times of war we still gave birth or passed away, but we did not register these facts of life as we would in times of peace¹⁷

It is clear from his story that the introduction of new regulations passed some of these people by. What is striking in his story is the fact that he uses the word 'Indonesia' for what at the time was still the Netherlands East Indies. Many informants use Indonesia to denote their country of origin but it should be clear that Indonesia as a country did not exist at the time their ancestors left the Netherlands East Indies. Another important point is that he plainly states that he and his fellow Bawean did not intend to stay forever. This is a diasporic sentiment that I have found in many interviews and I will introduce further below.

As has already been mentioned, some realized that there might exist a direct link between the way people were labelled and officially classified and the possibility to leave the country. This resulted in a scramble for national and ethnic identities. Descendants of Bawean immigrants that had lived in Vietnam for several generations now dug up their grandparents' papers from former regimes or looked for foreigners that had prayed at their mosque to vouch for them. Some would present themselves as foreigners in the hope that they would be accepted as aliens by the new administration and were allowed to leave the country.

Some used false documents that claimed nationalities such as Arab, Indonesian, Malaysian, Yemenite, Chinese and Cambodian. Quite a few Bawean informants suggested that

¹⁷ Interview with Ahmed, January 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City.

one could easily buy formal identities because many of the state officials were corrupt. This is in line with Huynh Kim Khanh's piece that states that,

The regime has also tried to deal with an unexpected, yet apparently proved to be most serious, problem that had occurred since liberation, that is, corruption and bureaucratism among revolutionary cadres. In a few months following liberation, the population of Saigon was astonished beyond belief to discover that there were among the supposedly puritanical and morally upright communist cadres those who willingly accepted bribes or demanded them [...] There are well-known incidents of cadres accepting bribes or even joining schemes of extortion. Other cadres gave work to unemployed prostitutes (perhaps out of humanity?)¹⁸

Some informants suggested that the state officials were just ill experienced,

Because at that time the administration had just entered, they could not differentiate, whichever person held this or that paper he would just get that identity. The new regime only wanted to know what kind of foreign resident you were, so all they did was to identify everyone according to the papers from the old regime¹⁹.

They further explained that as a consequence many Bawean individuals were able to register as non-Vietnamese citizens. This meant that some had passed the first hurdle on the way out of the country, but they often could not pass the second one, the consulate of their supposed country of origin. These institutions would not directly accept people who could not provide all needed materials or as Scott puts it, who did not speak the 'language of the state',

If you wish to have anything standing in law, you must have a document that officials accept as evidence of citizenship, be that document a birth certificate, passport, or identity card. The categories used by state agents are not merely means to make their environment legible; they are an authoritative tune to which most of the population must dance (Scott 1998: 76)

It was with this authoritative tune that the Indonesian Consulate rejected Bawean men and women who could not provide documentation clearly stating the Netherlands East Indies as their country of origin. This is where the second hurdle proved too high.

To begin with, many had no papers whatsoever. If people had any documentation at all, the French Colonial Administration had in most cases provided it. As was said earlier, these papers stated *Malais* as their ethnic affiliation. These papers were not accepted as proof of being of Bawean origin.

If people had no proper papers, the consular officials would start looking for relatives or ancestors in the country to vouch for these people. In most cases they could not find anyone in the country of origin to sponsor the Bawean individuals. It had become almost impossible to return to their country of origin. Many of the Bawean individuals I met suggested that up until that point they or their family had taken their return to their country of origin as a matter of fact. They were now suddenly confronted with the realization that there was no way back for them.

It should be stressed at this point that many of the Bawean people who lived with this idea of a return to their country of origin belonged to a second-generation of immigrants. These men and women had been born in Indochina and the supposed country of origin, Bawean Island was their parents' place of origin not theirs. This prolonged idea of return to

¹⁸ Huynh Kim Khanh, "Year One of Postcolonial Vietnam" *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1977) 4:287, 296

¹⁹ Interview with Ahmed, January 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

a country that one has never visited is a phenomenon often found among diasporic communities. We will pursue this issue further below.

Other Bawean individuals decided to stay in Vietnam because they had heard rumours about the new area of settlement in Indonesia. Mohamed remembers some of the stories about where they would end up if they would return,

We heard from people that the Indonesian government was clearing a piece of jungle for the home-comers close to Pontianak [West Kalimantan]. We heard that this area was hardly any good because it was far removed from any city and lacked infrastructure. Some of the older ones here did not want to go there because there were a lot of spirits, ghosts! Because of the Japanese, they killed many locals right there. So many here were concerned and decided to stay²⁰.

Those people who could not leave had to re-register at the local police offices together with the people who had decided to stay in the first place. Not everyone did because some were not aware of the need to re-register or did not have the funds to do so. Others decided not to comply. They feared the new administration and wanted to stay under the radar screen of the state. Those who did register were classified as alien citizens. Almost all Bawean who registered received an alien status in Vietnam with *quốc tịch Mã Lai* [Malay nationality] as their nationality.

To summarise, in the first part of this article I already mentioned that the French had labelled the Bawean with the ethnonym and cover term *Malais*. This became *Malay* during the Second Indochina War under the US-backed regimes and was still used as an ethnonym. This term was later translated into Vietnamese and resulted in the ethnic cover term *Mã Lai*. However, the use of the ethnic cover *Mã Lai* in direct combination with the term *quốc tịch* [country or nationality] on formal identity papers is troublesome. It states that the holder of such identity papers is a citizen of the non-existent state ‘Malay’. Below, I will show how this led to misunderstandings under Vietnam’s current government.

Ethnic classifications in Vietnam

After the second Indochina war, for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam enhancing national integration has been a constant preoccupation and even today great emphasis is placed on strengthening unity among the nation’s different ethnic groups. The metaphor of the Vietnamese nation as a single ‘great family’ is frequently invoked and *Kinh* ethnic chauvinism officially discouraged. After the Re-unification, determining the ethnic identity of its citizens became an important state priority²¹. Current literature often portrays the state as the dominant institution in society, whose political policies regulate ethnicity and increasingly shape ethnic boundaries and influence patterns of ethnic identification²². As indicated above, Charles Keyes presented ethnic classification as a State’s instrument of power to control people living on the fringes of society²³.

When it comes to the non-migrant Vietnamese indigenous population, the state did not fully respect the ethnic consciousness of members of ethnic groups. Charles Keyes indicates that in cases where there were disagreements between the subjective definition and

²⁰ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

²¹ Terry A. Rambo, “Vietnam,” *Ethnicity in Asia, Asia’s Transformations* (M. Selden, London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002): 109-135

²² Stéphane Doyet, Benoît de Tréglodé, *Vietnam Contemporain*. Collection Monographies Nationales (IRASEC Les Indes Savantes, 2004).

²³ Charles F. Keyes “‘The Peoples of Asia’: Science and politics in the classification of ethnic group in Thailand, China, and Vietnam” (*Journal of Asian Studies*, 2002): 1163-1203, 1174

the objective definition, the ethnologists were instructed to use ‘scientific data’ collected among people or elicited from historical records to explain to the people in question who they were supposed to be, often imposing an identity on them in the process.

A comprehensive classification was not completed until 1979 and in 1989 another similar scientific investigation was carried out reaffirming that there were (still) 54 ethnic groups in all of Vietnam. However, as Priscilla Koh has indicated,

based on the research findings of a recent investigation in several minority regions, it is likely that the figure is much higher than the present 54. The researchers noted that a significant number of minority groups wanted to be reclassified as a separate or different ethnic group.²⁴

Later on in this article I will show that in line with some of the minority groups mentioned above, Bawean individuals too went out of their way to negotiate with state officials. They wished to be classified according to their own expectations even though these might contrast with state criteria.

In 1976, after the Second Indochina War, the newly established Vietnamese government registered aliens at the *ủy ban quân quản thành phố Sài Gòn Gia Định* [the City’s Military Committee of Administrative Affairs]. Many Bawean men and women received identity papers for alien citizens called ‘*Iải [sic] chứng nhận thương trú tạm thời [sic]*’ [temporary residency permit]. These papers had tables printed on them that were used to provide information about a person such as family- and given names [*họ và tên*], sex [*nam nữ*] and *quốc tịch* [citizenship’ or ‘nationality’²⁵]. In this case the officials recorded *Mã Lai* [Malay] under the last category. The Bawean men and women had unwittingly attained *quốc tịch Mã Lai* meaning Malay²⁶ citizenship.

It is important to note here that *dân tộc* [ethnic affiliation] was not asked for nor was it recorded on these documents. This term is problematic as well and has been applied ambiguously in the past,

The term *dan toc* Tay could refer to the Tay ethnic minority at one level, and/or a hypothetical Tay nation and nationality on the other. Although this ambiguity was never clarified by party leaders and academics alike, it seems that in its narrower definition, and specifically with regard to minority groups or communities, the term *dan toc* refers to an ‘*ethnie*’ or ethnic group, not nation or nationality per se (at least not ‘nationality’ as commonly understood, i.e. in the sense of being part of a separate and sovereign independent nation-state)²⁷

Under Vietnam’s current government an ethnic label was given another role. *Mã Lai* was interpreted as ‘being of Malaysian nationality’ even though the word for Malaysia is *Malaixia*. This confusion on how to classify this group of people has resulted in an ethnonym being reinterpreted as a nationality and being transformed into a status of foreign citizenship. The combination of this ethnic cover term together with the formal term ‘nationality’ is a contradiction. It is troublesome just like the term ‘of Arab nationality’ would be today. The term suggests that the person holding these papers in Vietnam is an alien and

²⁴ Priscilla Koh, “Persistent Ambiguities: Vietnamese Ethnology in the Doi Moi Period,” (Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies Student Association 2004) 5: 1, 3

<http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/vol5no2.html> (accessed July16 2007), 5

²⁵ Bùi Phụng, *Từ Điển Việt Anh* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2003)

²⁶ Bùi Phụng, *Từ Điển Việt Anh* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2003)

²⁷ Priscilla Koh, “Persistent Ambiguities: Vietnamese Ethnology in the Doi Moi Period,” (Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies Student Association 2004) 5: 1, 3 <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/vol5no2.html> (accessed July16 2007), 5

does not have Vietnamese citizenship. It implies that this individual is a citizen somewhere else outside Vietnam. The nation indicated however does not exist.

State officials may have erroneously interpreted *malais* and later *Mã Lai* as Malaysia or it may mean that state officials have their own idiom that differs from academic interpretations when it comes to ethnic classifications. Even in 2005 in conversations with the authors, state officials at the local police station used *quốc tịch Mã Lai* [Malay nationality] and *quốc tịch Malaixia* [Malaysian nationality] interchangeably. In both cases they meant Malaysian nationality. Today an ethnic cover term is still used to denote nationality and a term signifying nationality is used to indicate ethnic origin. This may indicate that there is some confusion on how to use these terms or there is a structurally different interpretation of ethnonyms in the language of the state.

The Bawean individuals who received such papers were caught in a real Catch 22 because neither Vietnam, nor Indonesia or Malaysia accepted them as their citizens. As Aliens in Vietnam they had to re-register at the immigration office yearly until 1997. Around 1997 they suddenly received a paper called '*giấy tờ chứng nhận thương trú của người nước ngoài*' [permanent residence status for foreigners]. This also served as an identity card. They were told that they did not have to present themselves every year anymore, but would be contacted if deemed necessary, but they never were. Up until 2003, the Bawean individuals in this case study had no papers other than the 'permanent residence status for foreigners' they received earlier. Officially they were alien citizens belonging to a 'Malay state'.

Interaction of the State-less with the Vietnamese State

There is not much literature on similar cases because for Vietnam, discussions of ethnicity have generally been restricted to the official minority groups and communities consisting of Vietnamese citizens. Immigrants with transnational contacts residing in the country who fall outside official ethnic classifications of the fifty-four *dân tộc* received less attention. We will focus on the Bawean interaction with Vietnamese state officials as both parties try to achieve their projects.

Charles Keyes described the modern state as one that 'disciplines'; one that attempts to impose 'standard grids' on the diversity of both humans and nature, which it brings under its control. State, civil society and nationalist precepts constrain processes of ethnic identification and 'influence modes of ethnic organization'. This has also been the case for the Bawean living in Vietnam. When the state classified them as aliens they were cut off from all jobs limited to Vietnamese citizens.

However, such decisions are not the state's alone to make. People like the Bawean are perfectly capable of moving out of the state's gaze into so-called blind spots. In the past many of them did not register and succeeded in living in Vietnam without any papers whatsoever until their death. Such non-conformity has been found among other groups in Vietnam as well. Oscar Salemin²⁸ for example has written about the resistance among Montagnards against the state's attempts of surveillance and discipline. To evade state control people would move to villages in remote areas. We have to keep in mind however that the Bawean do not live in remote mountainous areas, instead they live in the center of the country's economic hub.

For example, Bawean parents still do not automatically accept that their children are Vietnamese upon birth. Partly because they do not want to burden their sons with army en-

²⁸ Oscar Salemin, *The ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: a historical contextualization, 1850-1990*, (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003)

listment but the main reason is that they still wish to hold on to what they consider to be their original ethnic identity. When they register the birth of a child, they argue and plead with local authorities to leave their children's nationality open so that he or she can decide what nationality he or she wishes to choose at eighteen, the age when one needs to apply for an identity card. This shows how the Bawean are able to manipulate and limit the state's control by staying outside of the standard grids.

It is important however to note that people like the Bawean are not only capable of living under the state's radar so to speak. Below I will show that people do make themselves officially known and have themselves formally classified by Vietnamese state officials on their own terms.

Up until 2003 this group of around two thousand people had at least sixty-five individuals who had no citizenship even though they had been born in Vietnam. Their country of origin, current-day Indonesia did not accept them as its citizens, making these people stateless citizens. Even in 2007, these people still live around the mosque and maintain distinct religious and ethnic characteristics that set them apart from non-Muslims such as the Kinh and Muslims such as the Cham alike. Ironically, according to numerous Bawean individuals they applied for Vietnamese citizenship precisely to uphold some of these ethnic characteristics.

It is important to point out here that for them to be Bawean is to be a good Muslim and a proper Muslim goes on the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his life. For them, religion is a fundamental part of their ethnic identity. What was at stake for the group of sixty-five Bawean individuals was the fulfilment of one of their religiously inspired dreams, to go on the *hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca].

They were aware that the only way they would be able to leave Vietnam and enter Saudi Arabia was with a passport. They developed a strategy of partial participation while at the same time preserving elements of their ethnic identity; the application for Vietnamese citizenship in order to leave the country temporarily. We will present the process of application for citizenship in greater detail in a section further below. Now I first need to reveal more about two important elements of Bawean ethnic identity, namely diasporic narratives and religion.

Longing for the Past: Diaspora

Mohamed is one of the sixty-five individuals who requested Vietnamese citizenship. When I first interviewed him or others within that group I was struck by their feelings that would lead us to believe none of them would ever accept Vietnamese citizenship,

I was born right here at home in 1952. My father came from Bawean Island and my mother came from Singapore. But her parents came from Bawean too. We have lived here all our lives. Because of them I am proud about my ethnic origins. I often think of my parents and grandparents, it makes me long to return to my origins. They passed away but when I think of them I remember their stories and then I miss Bawean Island and I want to go back. I can still hear my mother's singing and I am ashamed that I don't know what the words mean anymore²⁹.

What is of interest here are his sentiments. He mentions he misses and wishes to return to a place he has never set foot on. This idea of return, it will be recalled, was expressed in other interviews with most of the individuals applying for Vietnamese citizenship. He even

²⁹ Interview with Mohamed, May 2001, Hồ Chí Minh City

expresses shame for not being able to understand a language he never acquired or needed in his host country.

The Bawean I interviewed and who are presented in the case study below exhibited typical behaviours of members of a diasporic community. They often mentioned the powerful sentiments they experience such as a longing for their roots, for the life on the Island Bawean and its people. Memories and ideas about their origins and ideas about what it means to be Bawean feed this longing. In discussions, they often mentioned how their senses, taste, sight, smell and hearing stir up memories that bring about these strong emotions that are both based on and strengthen their ethnic identity. This idea and these strong sentiments are phenomena often found among diasporic communities.

Robin Cohen sees a diaspora as a post-migration population entertaining imagined and actual connections with a place of origin and with people of similar cultural origins elsewhere. By “imagined” it is not meant that such connections might not be actual. Rather, the often, strong sentiments and mental pictures according to which members of diasporas organize themselves and undertake their cultural practices are emphasized. A focus towards the place of origin can take forms such as, cultural, religious, or economic endeavours.

During group interviews the Bawean argue amongst themselves about the content of their grandfathers’ or grandmothers’ life stories that take place on the Island Bawean. Sometimes they suddenly lash out with a *pencak silat* move, an Indonesian martial art they regret not having learned from their grandfather. They demonstrate stances of dances they saw their mothers perform. They whisper of magical powers and regret the loss of their valued *keris* knives they had to turn in under the Japanese occupation. They stress how their senses bring back memories of places and times past. The waft of a *Kretek* clove cigarette, the tastes and smells of *ayam nứng* [(sic) grilled chicken] or *sate* [meat grilled on wooden skewers] burning on the grill by the side of the road are no longer mere smells, but have become fragrances that bring out this yearning for something that their parents and grandparents instilled in them. They hum songs and congratulate each other when they hear others sing words they themselves have forgotten the meaning of. These memories and emotions affect the actions they take in daily life. An example I mentioned earlier was the re-naming of their mosque to stress their relation to a mosque in Indonesia’s capital and to distance themselves from the ethnonym *Mã Lai*.

These feelings are reproduced within the family by grandparents and parents, through stories, historical narratives told over and over again to children and among adults. These stories or as Charles Keyes calls them, narratives of origin, migration are also reproduced within the wider community for example during national Indonesian festivals, sermons and interactions with staff of the Indonesian consulate. Bawean individuals are proud of their heritage as it sets them apart from Vietnamese in general and Cham in particular. The differences within their community are glossed over and the differences between their community and other communities around them are temporarily deepened. This is achieved through their idiosyncratic manner of performing social-religious rituals such as circumcisions and marriages, or religio-cultural festivities such as the birthday of the prophet Mohammed and the celebration of national or transnational holidays after the independence of Indonesia in 1945. From conversations I had with the organisers of the festivities for the prophet’s birthday, it became clear that they experienced religious, ethnic and national pride. Guests from other Muslim communities such as the Cham commented in interviews that the way the Bawean went about organising that celebration was out of order. They confided that it focused too much attention on the prophet and was a form of *shirk*, polytheism which is strictly forbidden in Islam. When I confronted the Bawean with this idea,

they seemed pleased almost and reacted that these were the differences between their culture and that of other communities.

Apart from feelings of pride, they also experience feelings of shame about losing certain aspects they imagine are intrinsically ethnically theirs. One such skill is to be able to speak or sing using *Bahasa Indonesia*, the official Indonesian variant of Malay and the language they assume their ancestors spoke. Mohamed studied the language and even started an on-line course *Bahasa Indonesia*,

We once had a consul who was a Christian so he did not pray at the mosque, but his assistant was really friendly and he gave a lecture at the mosque about us, our roots, about Bawean Island. It filled us with pride and longing but we were also ashamed because he spoke in Indonesian first and we did not understand anything he said at first. He was very surprised that people had forgotten their own language and he offered us help to study Indonesian at the consulate. That is how I started to learn *Bahasa*³⁰.

He studied the Indonesian language for a while but did not pursue it because there were hardly any opportunities to use these language skills. It is important however to note that their parents did not speak *Bahasa Indonesia*. At the time the first Bawean left their Island for the French colony, *Bahasa* as an official language did not yet exist. It became the national language of Indonesia not until after 1949. Before he accepted an offer from the consulate to study *Bahasa Indonesia* Mohamed had never learned the language or the local variant of Madurese that his parents may have spoken. In a sense he changes history or the narratives of history by thinking or remembering that *Bahasa Indonesia* was his forefather's language of origin. This shows us how narratives and the roots this group of people recalls change, and with them, the content of its ethnic identity changes. To paraphrase Liisa Malkki³¹, people's roots move, change shape, colour and grow.

These narratives, focused on a connection with their place of origin and as such they are what Cohen defines as 'imagined connections with a place of origin and with people of similar cultural origins elsewhere'. It is these perceived connections with their place of origin that have driven them to the renaming of the mosque, to entertaining warm relations with the consulate and to the acquisition of a foreign language. These same sentiments brought about by the narratives have led them to request citizenship at the Indonesian consulate first and to negotiate with Vietnamese state officials about the choice of their official ethnonym.

A Case Study

It should be recognized from the outset that this case study does not present everybody's views within the community. Different ideas exist about religion and issues related to ethnic identity. There exist variations between the views of the younger and older generations, between men and women, between families living around the mosque in the urban center and the families living on the Bawean cemetery on the outskirts of the city. Youths living around the mosque do not identify with their Bawean past the same way their parents do and some see each other as Vietnamese Muslims. Some Bawean families have received Cham identity papers. These people do not live around the Bawean mosque and instead pray in a mosque run by a Cham community. They too do not identify with the same his-

³⁰ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

³¹ Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 7 (1992): 24-44

toric elements that are of such importance to the people I will present below. In that sense the community is quite heterogenic.

The people presented below are elderly men and women who on certain occasions play an important role in the community. These people manage festivities organised for example around the prophet Mohamed's birthday. It is during such happenings that the community closes its ranks and presents a closed front, a closed ethnic Bawean boundary as it were. The way they organise and execute such activities differs from other Muslim and non-Muslim communities and this in turn actively adds to the pronunciation of the Bawean identity. In short although the people introduced in the case study below do not present the whole community, they influence and manage the way this group presents itself through festivities and rituals.

Although I have spoken with many individuals, I have chosen to narrate their shared trajectory from one individual's perspective. This individual has been a spokesperson for the group and has taken the lead within this group during their citizenship application process. In the beginning of the application process sixty-five of his fellow Bawean would join his visits to state officials, but this proved to be impractical in the long run. Instead he collected their files and submitted their applications along with his. The case documented below is based on interviews with several informants, but I have decided to mainly quote Mohamed because he experienced every step of the application process.

Mohamed's Case

Mohamed is a fifty-five year old widower and lives with his children close to the Bawean mosque. He and his children were born in Vietnam and have lived in Vietnam since. He has recently received Vietnamese citizenship but both his daughter and son who are under eighteen years of age do not hold official Vietnamese citizenship.

He has a lot of time on his hands and in between such activities he visits Internet cafes to check his mail and look at Islamic sites of various sorts³². Directly after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 for example, he followed discussions about Bin Laden and currently he tries to keep himself informed on the War on Terror in the Middle East. He likes to chat with fellow Muslims or takes a virtual tour around Mecca. He can spend hours on end on the Internet playing online games or listening to Koran recitations.

Religion as a part of his ethnic repertoire is more widely documented on the Internet than the cultural or historic facets of his ethnicity. Often the interviewees stressed the inherent connection between their origins and Islam and feelings of pride and shame,

Islam is our religion. A good Bawean is a good Muslim and that makes us different from the Vietnamese even different from many Cham. When I have prayed five times like yesterday I feel much better about myself. If I forget to live properly or to pray, I feel ashamed. I want to live a good life so I try to be close to God. When I have a chance I want to go to Mecca as well³³.

From interviews with him and others I learned that this part of their ethnic identity not only connects them with Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world but connects them with Muslims on a global scale as well. Islamic religious practices such as prayer and fasting during *Ramadan* [the month of fasting] and eating *halal* food promote a sense of belonging to a worldwide religious Muslim community.

³² <http://www.islamworld.net/>, <http://www.islam101.com/>, <http://www.angelfire.com/>

³³ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

According to Ralph Grillo, what is at stake in transnational identities is a certain degree and form of identification with an imagined 'transnational' community such as the *umma*³⁴. The Bawean realize, when performing Islam's rituals, that they share duties and practices of Muslims across political borders. During sermons their *imam* [leader, prayer leader] narrates Islam's histories and mentions Muslims in other parts of the world. Daily discussions in people's homes about Muslims for example in Iraq, Afghanistan and Southern Thailand create and strengthen an imagination of an Islamic community transcending the boundaries and borders of their local mosque.

These practices and sources of information they find in their mosque however, cannot compete with the information they delve up from transnational interactions they develop through the Internet. Steven Vertovec describes a transnational network as the existence of communication and interactions of many kinds that members of a group undertake with others in the homeland or elsewhere within the globalized ethnic or religious community³⁵. From discussions with various informants, it has become clear that the Bawean do not interact with other Bawean either in the place of origin or elsewhere. They do however increasingly use the computer to learn more about Islam.

These transnational sources of information strengthen their awareness that they are part of a larger global religious community as well. Mohamed uses the Internet to learn about the state of Muslim world affairs or to chat with fellow Muslims in other countries. For him it is the only source of religious information in Vietnam besides personal narratives of people who have returned from studies overseas or pilgrimages. His daily visits to Internet cafes connect him and others like him to a transnational religious network that forces him to think about his stance on things not only as a human being in general, but also as a Muslim in particular.

Benedict Anderson³⁶ has noted that print media have had great influences on nationalism. We suggest that currently new media may well be doing the same for Islamic repertoires and narratives in Vietnam where printed matter such as secondary literature on religious issues is hard to come by. Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson³⁷ emphasize how such a new sense of collective awareness and connection among Muslims in various parts of the globe has especially been forged through new communication technologies. Nina Smart adds that:

Such a consciousness of belonging to a world community has grown considerably in very recent times. Even for relatively remote groups, transnational narratives "construct and negotiate the relationships between multiple identities" by tying individuals and communities into larger common constituencies³⁸.

Bawean individuals shape the religious repertoires of their ethnic identity by their visits to Internet cafes and chat rooms. Some of them spend several hours a day, a few days a week on this digital gateway to global Islamic opinion, science, history, law, gossip, sermons, and popular culture such as music, movies and merchandise. They burn audio re-

³⁴ Ralph Grillo, "Islam and Transnationalism" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* no. 30 (2004): 861-878

³⁵ Steven Vertovec, "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1999)22: 447-463

³⁶ Benedict R. O. G. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

³⁷ Dale Eickelman, and Jon Anderson, *New media in the Muslim world: the emerging public sphere*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999)

³⁸ Nina Smart, "The importance of diasporas," *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism* (Steven Vertovec and Rob Cohen, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1999): 420-429

cordings of sermons, Quran recitations, *fatwa*'s [legal experts' or consultants' written legal opinions], Arabic language lessons and news on VCD's and watch them at home. They learn about international religious scholarships and funds that sponsor Muslim pilgrimages. They chat with fellow believers in all parts of the world about topics both religious and political. In other words, the new media wave is currently doing for their Islamic repertoires and narratives what printed media have done for nationalism and the Bawean are actively surfing that wave.

From interviews with many Bawean both young and old I learned that they are able to access every Islamic Internet site they look for. This seems surprising especially if we consider that according to some scholars the Vietnamese state tends to place religious communities under close scrutiny.

Since the September 11, 2001, assault on the World Trade Centre in New York, public discourse has often referred to Muslim networks as fundamentalist and academics around the world feared that Southeast Asian states, even those that are Islamic might develop distrust for Muslim communities or individuals. This may lead to states trying to control such communities. According to Trần Thị Liên³⁹ for example, religions are under real control because of their possible effect on the masses. Religions run the risk of becoming political. So it is to prevent religion becoming a political concurrent of the state that the state conserves its control over religious activities.

It is true that in the past Bawean and Muslim Cham communities in Hồ Chí Minh City were visited by police for check-ups. Although such visits do not occur any more, the *công an phường* [neighbourhood police] have certain contacts within the communities that are supposed to report any 'irregularities.' Examples of irregularities are local people planning to organise a religious festivity without state permission or informal visits of foreign visitors from Malaysia or Saudi Arabia. These informants are also called upon to come to the police station for specially convened meetings, for instance, directly after September 11, 2001 to gauge the reactions of the local Muslims. It is important to stress that these contacts work both ways, for example when in 2000, in Hồ Chí Minh City a Vietnamese non-Muslim threw a piece of pork meat into the Nancy mosque in district one. The man was reported and arrested. According to informants he received a sentence for seven years of imprisonment.

Trần Thị Liên⁴⁰ suggests that the Vietnamese State carries an inborn distrust for religious communities rooted in the universal lack of sympathy socialist governments feel for religious communities in general. But Jay Willoughby⁴¹ finds that the Vietnamese government's attitude toward the Muslim Cham is becoming more relaxed, partly due to Hanoi's good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia. His observation is supported by our interviews with both Bawean and Cham individuals in southern Vietnam.

The government allows mosques to set up independent mosque committees and to organise religious training and Arabic language classes. Muslim students study at international Muslim universities, Vietnamese Muslim delegates attend international conferences and participate in Quran recitation competitions in Southeast Asian countries. The last few years an increasing number of Muslims went on pilgrimage to Mecca and two years ago the Vietnamese government allowed the publication of the first bilingual Quran in Vietnamese

³⁹ Trần Thị Liên, "La question religieuse," Vietnam Contemporain, Collection Monographies Nationales (Stéphane Doyet, Benoît de Tréglodé, IRASEC Les Indes Savantes, 2004): 369-382

⁴⁰ idem

⁴¹ Jay Willoughby, "The Cham Muslims of Vietnam," ISIM newsletter, (Leiden, 1999)

and Arabic. At present there are 61 mosques in Vietnam and one third of them have been repaired with international funds. New mosques are built.

I am aware of some of the internal and international discussions on Vietnamese law when it comes to religious freedom. We do not deny that the Vietnamese State has seriously suppressed non-approved religious communities and ethno-nationalistic movements in other areas in Vietnam⁴². But, I do wish to point out the contrast that exists between its approach towards Muslims and other religious communities. In the past decade, as far to what many countries consider being the major global threat of the moment the Vietnamese government has been, comparatively, quite relaxed in their control. Mohamed for example can move around freely and visit Internet cafes or other people's houses whenever he wants without being scrutinized.

He visits the mosque every day and uses the opportunity to visit others from the community. On his visits his friends and neighbours discuss their children, grandchildren, developments at the mosque and national and international affairs. International affairs discussed are often centred on Muslims in other countries, such as the war in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the current problems in Southern Thailand.

In the past he had wanted to go on the *hajj*, but did not have sufficient funds for the journey and hoped that he would be eligible for sponsorship. In 1999 Mohamed received news that he could apply for a sponsorship from the Saudi royal family to go on the *hajj*. He could not accept this funding because he did not have a passport. When in 2001 he again heard of such a sponsorship, he decided to apply for a passport, even if that meant accepting Vietnamese citizenship.

He knew that foreigners had to apply for citizenship at the Hồ Chí Minh City Department of Foreign Affairs at the level of Hồ Chí Minh City's People's Committee. They would have to buy and fill in several official documents and have their knowledge of Vietnamese culture and language tested. Lastly they had to provide a document of the embassy of the country where they were currently citizens. The embassy or consulate had to put in writing that it had been notified of its citizen's change of nationality and that it gave permission to do so. Only then would the Vietnamese government accept the application for Vietnamese citizenship. However it was impossible for Mohammed and the others to provide such a document because none of the consulates accepted him and his fellow Bawean as citizens,

I had studied the documents, you know, I studied law but could not finish it.... Anyway, so I knew that we could not get that letter because we had no citizenship. We did not belong anywhere. Our papers said *quốc tịch Mã Lai* [Malay nationality] and *Malais* [Malay]. Some officials here told us we were Malaysian but I know those terms do stand for a country. Malaysia and Indonesia would not give us such a letter...still many of us wanted to try to become Indonesian citizens again. That is why, in the beginning I did not go to the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City⁴³.

What is striking in this quote is that people express the explicit wish to become Indonesian citizens again. This is troublesome because of several reasons. The first, as indicated earlier in this article, none of them has ever been an Indonesian citizen, mainly because that nation did not exist yet when their ancestors left for Indochina and because since its establishment it has not recognised any of the descendants still left in Vietnam up to 2007.

⁴² Writenet, Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands, (UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, 5/2001)

⁴³ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

Another important point is that since their first settlement in what is Vietnam today, these men and women have married Muslim and non-Muslim local men and women such as Cham, Chinese and Kinh. Although they have intermarried with communities of different ethnic backgrounds for three generations, Mohamed and others in the Bawean group express pride in being an ethnic group of Indonesian origin. Some still see their grandchildren as *người Chà Và*. Meet for example Abdulhadi⁴⁴, *hakim*, [judge] and a first generation descendant from Bawean immigrants. He was caretaker of the Bawean Mosque in 2001. He recalls:

I was born in Saigon in 1924 but I still consider myself an '*orang Bawean*', [Bawean man person]. Most of the *người Chà Và* living in Hồ Chí Minh City now are from the same area as my parents were. Almost everybody is Bawean here around the mosque⁴⁵.

The informant uses the term *Người Chà Và* [from Java, Malay, and Malayan⁴⁶] here. I wish to point out here that this touches one of the nerves of the problem I wish to explore -the ethnic labelling of people. Both the labels people use for their own kin and the labels the state officials use are subject to the same phenomena: labels change through time but more importantly they have the tendency to change instantly as well depending on the context. We wish to point out that it is far more informative to understand the dynamics behind the acceptance or rejection of certain labels than it is to know or search for the 'correct' or 'objective' labels for people based for example on their place of origin.

Here Weber's definition of ethnic groups is useful. He sees ethnic groups as,

Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists⁴⁷.

Weber speaks of an ethnic community's subjective belief in common descent. There is no need for an existing objective blood relationship for people to feel ethnically connected. We found this belief in Mohamed who was born in Indochina and whose mother is from Singapore. Just as many of his fellow Bawean he grew up in the country now known as Vietnam but he still longs for a place none of them have ever set foot in. It is this belief in common descent fuelled by diasporic narratives that stimulated the group of elderly Bawean to first visit the Indonesian consulate in Hồ Chí Minh City.

A Visit to the Indonesian Consulate in Sarong

The group of sixty-five elderly Bawean men and women dressed in their interpretation of Bawean costumes had set off for the Indonesian consulate.

We all went to the Indonesian consulate because we feel that we are Indonesian and should have Indonesian citizenship so that we may return to Indonesia. If that was not possible we wanted them to help us receive Vietnamese citizenship. I thought that they would help us because we maintained good relations with the Indonesian consulate here. Sometimes our contact cooled down. It depended on which religion the consul adhered to. If he or she were Muslim, the consul along with staff would pray here at the mosque every Friday. They would invite us to Indonesian national and

⁴⁴ All names are pseudonyms to protect the informants' identities

⁴⁵ Interview with hakim of mosque, July, 2001, Hồ Chí Minh City

⁴⁶ Bùi Phụng, *Từ Diên Việt Anh* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2003)

⁴⁷ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002)

religious festivities held at the consulate. The consul and some of his co-workers have also asked our *imam* to teach, to advise on family matters.

I told you that we used to have strong magic. We had a man here. He was a *dukun*. [sorcerer and village medicine man or healer]. He has performed rituals such as *selamatan* [Javanese ceremonial meal] there. He has passed away now. He was very strong. He could do exorcisms. One time he had to exorcise a spirit at the Indonesian consul's house. We all went and spent the afternoon and the night at his place. This was an Indonesian spirit so he had to do it. No other nationality [sic] could help her. So that is why I went there first.

I dressed in a *sarong* with a *batik* shirt and met with the consul general. He was so surprised when I spoke using *Bahasa Indonesia*. I said: 'you know us, we are descendants of Bawean and we are connected to Indonesia by blood. You pray in our Indonesian mosque and we have been in your house. We feel we should become Indonesian citizens because our identity is in our blood, our bones and in our marrow even!

They [men and women of the consulate] explained that they knew that we [the Bawean in Hồ Chí Minh City] were of Indonesian origin, but formally they could not accept us as Indonesian citizens under Indonesian law. 'We know most of you but we cannot help you. You have lost touch with your families in Indonesia and you have no papers proving citizenship. It hurts us but it is impossible to accept you as citizens. We will help you and write a letter to the *Sở Ngoại Vụ* of Hồ Chí Minh City [Department of Foreign Affairs] explaining that you are all Bawean and of Indonesian origin but can not be accepted as citizens of Indonesia under Indonesian law. We will ask the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City to help you acquire Vietnamese citizenship'⁴⁸.

In this quotation there are several important elements that come to the fore. During the presentation of their case at the consulate the Bawean used the Indonesian language, dressed in Indonesian attire and spoke of magic and blood to show that they are tied to Indonesia. They also tried to tie the consular staff to themselves when they mentioned the role the *imam* had played in the past. We have shown above that the use of the Indonesian language is grounded in diasporic narratives that shape the community's ethnic identity. The same is the case with the Indonesian dress and the expression of blood ties and stories of magic.

What is of interest here as well is not only the theme used during the presentation, Indonesia, but also the way it was communicated. Thomas Hylland Eriksen shows that people are free to choose whether to over- or under-communicate their identity. Ethnic identities cannot be completely manipulated however, not because ethnic identities are primordial givens, but because if ethnic identities could be totally contrived, generated or administered by state agents, groups would have chosen any identity they wanted. When Mohamed presented his case he chose the Indonesian consulate because he and the group that went with him genuinely felt that they were of Indonesian origin and hoped to achieve Indonesian citizenship. He reminded the consular officials of their longstanding relation based on their shared place of origin in the hope that he might get out from under the Vietnamese state's control. When this did not succeed, he changed the way he communicated his case as we shall see below.

A Reprimand at Hồ Chí Minh City's Department of Foreign Affairs

Their first attempt had been unsuccessful and they decided to try the alternative, they would present their case at the Hồ Chí Minh City's Department of Foreign Affairs. From

⁴⁸ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

then on Mohamed took it upon himself to present their case at the various administrative offices and his fellow Bawean trusted him because of his legal studies.

When the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City received him its employees reprimanded him for going to the Indonesian embassy first.

I knew that they would be angry so I had to be real polite you know....Oh I wore pants and a normal shirt with my pair of shoes. I spoke really politely in Vietnamese of course. So I apologized and told them that we did not know how to do things properly and that we had only asked the Indonesian consulate for advice,...yes acting a little gullible...[laughs].

Then they asked why we wanted to become Vietnamese, I explained that in daily life, because we hold papers stating that we are foreigners we are in a real predicament. Being foreign has negatively influenced our daily interactions with the government. We cannot find work because for most good jobs we have to show our name documented in our *hộ khẩu thường trú* [family registration book for permanent residence]. But if you do not have Vietnamese citizenship you do not have a *hộ khẩu* so companies and small enterprises will not accept foreigners.

Because of this we are in a real fix economically and we do hope that you will study the case. We ask you to help us obtain Vietnamese nationality with ease. We want to have our names in a *hộ khẩu thường trú*. We were born in Vietnam, we grew up in Vietnam and have lived here ever since. We use Vietnamese language in our daily lives and have received Vietnamese education. We understand Vietnamese history, culture, laws, customs and traditions and that is why we are eligible for Vietnamese nationality⁴⁹.

As we have seen in the last quote, Mohamed did not dress in Indonesian traditional clothes and spoke Vietnamese. He stressed socio-economic reasons for his application, described how with papers stating alien status he had met difficulties with administrative procedures and was unable to apply for jobs in most companies or small factories. He also emphasized that he was born and grew up in Vietnam, conversed in Vietnamese in everyday life and more importantly had received Vietnamese education and this meant that he understood Vietnamese history, culture, law, customs and traditions.

In contrast to his presentation at the Indonesian consulate, he downplayed the group's ethnic sentiments at the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh. This is not only in line with Thomas Hylland Eriksen mentioned above, but also with George de Vos⁵⁰ who suggests that ethnic identity is something that agents can partly ascribe to themselves. He indicated that ethnic identity is something that can be actively manipulated in response to a certain need or context but at the same time ethnic identity also has a non-instrumental, non-political element providing a psychological feeling of security.

Mohammed told me how the members of staff at the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh were quiet for a moment. His words had turned their hostile approach around and they even complimented him on his Vietnamese Language skills. They offered him tea and sweets and discussed his life with him. They asked him about the kinds of work he had had, his religious beliefs and how he was housed. Eventually, they asked him to sit in the hallway while they studied the case more carefully in private. They returned after some time and explained they recognized this as a case that fell outside Vietnamese law.

They were used to cases where Vietnamese law fell short but they had not encountered a similar case before. They pointed out that Vietnamese law accepts everyone who applies

⁴⁹ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

⁵⁰ Vos, G., A. de. "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation", *The sociology of race and ethnicity* (M. Cross, Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, 2000): 3, 113-142.

for Vietnamese citizenship if he or she can live up to some of the following criteria: proficient in Vietnamese, knowledge of Vietnamese history, culture and customs, and a letter from one's country of current citizenship accepting the change of citizenship. This means that only people who already have citizenship somewhere, people who are recognized by a nation outside Vietnam as its citizens, can officially give up that citizenship in order to apply for Vietnamese citizenship. The people at the Department of Foreign Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City understood that Mohamed could not provide them with such a letter.

After further deliberation they advised Mohamed not to follow the regular route of citizenship application because this would be a dead end for him. Instead, the department wrote a letter to another governmental unit, the Hồ Chí Minh City Department of Legal Affairs at the level of in Hồ Chí Minh City's People's Committee. The letter explained the situation and requested their colleagues at the Department of Legal Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City to take a look at the case and to advise them on the matter. I traced one of the people at the Department of Foreign Affairs who helped Mohamed on his way. She is a legal expert and still remembers the case quite vividly. She machine-guns her words in a staccato northern accent while she goes over the case she answers phones and shuffles through papers,

Our law states that people should pledge that they should give up their original nationality, if they have one, when applying for Vietnamese citizenship. When they do not have a nationality at all, then it becomes a bit of a predicament, and that is why we solved the case of the Malays [Mã Lai] pro-actively and dynamically [linh hoạt]. Because, if I remember correctly, some of these people did have papers proving that they had been born in Vietnam. These were even from before 1954, mind you. And they had permanent residency papers for foreigners from the puppet regime. They knew their origins but could not locate their ancestors there anymore. The Legal Department here decided to act quickly and ask the consulate of Indonesia and Malaysia to state that these people were not accepted as their countries' citizens. From then on it had become a case of people who had no citizenship at all and it was then that Vietnam was prepared to accept them as its citizens. There you have it. That is a way to deal with something quickly and positively. In our law we had not yet dealt with such cases before, of people who have no citizenship. This department has definitely reported this case to the president of the country or to the Department of Justice to decide what to do with such cases in the future. Because to have fifty-five or so people who do not have a nationality in a city as crowded as ours, makes it really hard for the administration to govern the city⁵¹.

Her office composed the letter while Mohamed waited. The letter explained the situation and requested their colleagues at the Department of Legal Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City to take a look at the case and to advise them on the matter.

Joane Nagel⁵² suggests that the state's formal ascriptions of ethnic identity are the main factors in the development of ethnic identities. Our case study however suggests that there is some room for manipulation from the citizen's side. It shows the negotiation between the state's formal ascriptions and the strong sentiments of the people it needs to classify. The state officials at the Department of Foreign Affairs hardly tried to discipline Mohamed. On the contrary, when confronted with this case that clearly falls outside Vietnamese law they were quite friendly and proved pro-active in their approach to solve the matter. They could easily have forced him too take the regular approach or to keep his alien status. However not all departments in the Vietnamese state apparatus are as pro-active in their approach.

⁵¹ Interview with lawyer at the Department of Foreign Affairs, November 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

⁵² Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture", (Social Problems 1994) 41: 51-75

Pleading at the Department of Legal Affairs City and the Malaysian Consulate

I dressed like before, no not in a *sarong*, but still decent. I went over and had to wait for a long time. There was a lot of activity and people were running around with folders. When it was my turn I met with a young woman. She did not listen to me at all. I explained my case like before, but all she heard was that I was a foreigner and wanted to apply for Vietnamese citizenship. So she did not understand the case the way the people at the other department had. She said: ‘you want to become a Vietnamese national, you just go to the Department for Foreign Affairs and buy the forms just like everybody else.’ She closed the file and returned it to me so I left.

I knew that I had to find a different way so the next day I went to the consulate of Malaysia. I dressed the same as before like a businessman and spoke Vietnamese. It was so funny. When they heard my story they did know what to do. I asked them for a letter stating that firstly I was a Malaysian citizen and secondly that the Malaysian Consulate accepted my change of citizenship. They must have thought that I was not normal [laughs] to ask for citizenship in Malaysia just to replace it with Vietnamese citizenship⁵³.

As he had feared, the Malaysian consulate could not provide him with such a letter even though it was sympathetic to his case. The Department for Legal Affairs might not have been forthcoming immediately but eventually its officials went out of their way to provide a solution for this extraordinary case.

Relief at the Department of Legal Affairs and at the Malaysian Consulate

Mohamed now returned to Hồ Chí Minh City’s Department of Legal Affairs and explained to another of its employees that neither the Indonesian nor the Malaysian Governments had accepted him as citizen and that as a result they did not provide him with the letter that was required for the normal Vietnamese citizenship application for foreigners. The employees of the Department of Legal Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City now took an interest and they too acknowledged the difficulty of the situation. They withdrew in a back office and after some hours of deliberation they asked him to come back the next day. The next day they presented him with their solution. Instead of a letter of proof of foreign citizenship, they would now also accept a letter of proof of non-citizenship. They needed a letter of the Malaysian Consulate stating that Mohamed was not accepted as a Malaysian citizen.

He left for the consulate the next day and when he presented himself there the officials looked pained. When he conveyed them his new request they could hardly hide the relief they must have felt. They provided him with the needed document a month later. It stated that the he had never been a Malaysian citizen. When he left they excused themselves for not having been able to provide him with Malaysian citizenship.

Bargaining with the police of District 1 in Hồ Chí Minh City

Two and a half years after Mohamed had presented the letter provided by the Malaysian Consulate at the Department of Legal Affairs of Hồ Chí Minh City he received a document stating he had achieved Vietnamese citizenship. This is extremely fast compared to some fellow Muslims from Malaysia that had Malaysian citizenship and followed the regular trajectory for citizen application. They had waited for four years. This was a good first step, but what he really needed was a passport. The first thing he arranged was a *hộ khẩu*, [a family registration or household register], after that he could request a *thẻ chứng minh nhân dân* [identity card] at the office of the police of District 1. He could only put in a

⁵³ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

request for a Vietnamese passport if he had these other documents. When Mohamed went to the office of the police of District 1 to apply for his identity card however, he needed to fill out a request form called a *tờ khai chứng minh nhân dân*, [application form for citizenship] and this was the first document that required him apart from date of birth and religious affiliation, to record his *dân tộc* [ethnic identity].

Up until that point, *dân tộc* had not been an issue in the process of citizenship application. There had been no request to fill in his *dân tộc* on any of the papers he had submitted. Mohamed was aware that now that he had become a Vietnamese citizen, in this context *dân tộc*, meant the fifty-four state sanctioned ethnic identities. He was aware that his ethnic identity did not feature on the limited list of fifty-four, but he still wrote down ‘Bawean, Indonésia’,

An employee took one look at my application and did not even look up when he said, ‘Bawean, Indonésia’ does not belong to the ethnic possibilities.’ I explained my predicament and the employee called one of his colleagues over. Both officers studied my application and asked if I was really a foreigner, ‘How long did you study Vietnamese? It is really very good.’ I told them that I had been born and raised in this country and that it was part of me. It had fed me and I knew its customs. They expressed their surprise with the fluency of my Vietnamese once again. They asked me, ‘where is this Bawean located?’ and I drew a map on a piece of paper. Then a third official, a lady listened in. During the conversation she took my application and studied it. Then she said, ‘but you are a Muslim aren’t you?’ I answered, ‘yes’ and that was what she wanted to hear. She smiled, put down my application like this and as if she had found the solution she offered, ‘but then you’re just Cham right?’. So I pointed out that indeed most Cham were also Muslim but that I was certainly not Cham.

The lady called to the back of the office where some of her female colleagues were resting to come out and bring out the list of ethnic minorities. Two more ladies in uniform joined the group and brought a laminated list along. The first employee I had spoken to laid my application next to the list and the group compared [the term] ‘Bawean’ with the official list of ethnic groups in Vietnam. They were all quiet and I wondered what they would come up with. After careful scrutiny of both documents, one of them looked up and said that Bawean was not on the list. I said I believed he was right and I expressed hope that they would let me use my own chosen name [ethnonym]. One of the ladies pointed to the list, ‘how about Ba Na, is that not almost the same as Bawean?’. So I asked them all, ‘would you want to be called Cham?’ and they agreed, they would not. I explained, ‘my identity is part of my blood; it flows through these veins. I cannot accept someone else’s, just like you’.

They discussed the matter further and one of the uniformed men asked me, ‘are you sure that you cannot accept Cham?’, but the ladies in the group told him off and one of them even hit him on his upper arm [laughs], ‘how would you like to be called *Hoa* [ethnic Chinese]?’ She quipped. All of them found that unacceptable and giggled. At last I thought of *Indonésia* as an option and this was accepted after some deliberation because they said that Bawean was just too obscure, *Indonésia* was better known [sic]. When my identity card was finished one of the officials asked me not to show the card to anyone because *Indonesía* might get him into trouble⁵⁴.

Below I present an illustration⁵⁵ of the back of one of the identity cards that was provided at the police station.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mohamed, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

⁵⁵ The signature of the official has been removed to protect the identity



A thẻ chứng minh nhân dân [identity card]

Priscilla Koh⁵⁶, Rambo⁵⁷ and Salemink stress the Vietnamese government's pre-occupation with the need of Vietnamese citizens to belong to one of the fifty-four designated *dân tộc*. Paraphrasing Salemink, the state imposes its ethnic categories on the highland population for example through identity cards⁵⁸. Rambo too, mentions the identity card. "Every citizen must belong to one of the fifty-four recognized groups with this affiliation shown on the identity card everyone carries. No ambiguity is permitted. An individual having mixed ancestry must be assigned to only one group, normally the father's"⁵⁹

Mohamed's reception at the neighbourhood police office shows us a softer side of the Vietnamese state. Here it does not seem pre-occupied with strict categorization. It leaves room for a humane approach, room for ambiguity. Mohamed presented himself with an official document stating that he had already achieved Vietnamese citizenship. There was no need for him to be careful about his ethnic sentiments now. That is why he pleaded with the officials not to deny him the ethnonym that he chose as the official ethnic classification. The group of Bawean individuals who received Vietnamese citizenship were handed a *giấy chứng minh nhân dân* [identity card] with a *dân tộc* [formal ethnic affiliation] that does not feature on the 'list of fifty-four *dân tộc*', namely *Indonésia*.

This encounter with the local police was the first occasion when Mohamed was asked about his religion. Up until that point he had articulated his ethnic origins at the Indonesian consulate and he used socio-economic arguments at the Department of Internal Affairs but on none of the occasions was he asked or did he have to state his religious affiliation. Below I look at the state's approach to this group's religious activities.

Conclusions

This article deals with what seems to be a contradiction: by becoming Vietnamese citizens these people feel they strengthened their non-Vietnamese ethnic identity. Their actions are fed by cultural-religious motives stemming from a personal interpretation of their ethnic identity. Mohamed and others explained how they express and reproduce his cultural historic and contemporary religious narratives, influenced by experiences that are not only of local and national but also of transnational religious character. These experiences not

⁵⁶ Priscilla Koh, "Persistent Ambiguities: Vietnamese Ethnology in the Doi Moi Period," (Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies Student Association 2004) 5: 1, 3 <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/vol5no2.html> (accessed July 16 2007), 5

⁵⁷ Terry A. Rambo, "Vietnam," Ethnicity in Asia, Asia's Transformations (M. Selden, London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002): 109-135, 115

⁵⁸ Oscar Salemink, The ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: a historical contextualization, 1850-1990, (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003)

⁵⁹ Idem

only change narratives but also the notions of roots he recalls and, along with that, the content of his ethnic identity changes.

The Bawean men and women did not formalise their ethnic identity and nationality earlier because of the latent and sometimes explicitly expressed wish to return to Indonesia. We have indicated that such sentiments are often found among diasporic communities. They expressed the hope to return to Indonesia but without any knowledge of the language or acquaintances this seems difficult.

From interviews I gathered that in the past the community oriented its transnational contacts toward its homeland or toward Bawean relatives or acquaintances in other countries. In the past fifteen years, in their travels and transnational relations, the Bawean community has turned its focus away from its historical roots. They do not have these transnational relations anymore. They have intermarried with non-Bawean Muslims and non-Muslims. They do not speak their ancestors' language and have never set foot on their place of origin. They still believe themselves to be ethnically Bawean people belonging to Indonesia.

Together with cultural and historical ethnic repertoires described above, religious ideas and practices have become the most important marker of ethnicity and have shaped Bawean ethnic narratives. As such Islam is presented as an intrinsic part of 'being Bawean'. Today the Bawean community increasingly orients itself toward Muslim centres elsewhere and it uses new ways such as chatting and cheap international calls both made possible by the Internet. If they really wanted to return to Indonesia now that they have a passport they were able to do so. Instead they went on the *hajj*. Since they received a Vietnamese passport forty have been to Mecca, none have visited Indonesia.

In the case study presented the Bawean people actively dealt with different governmental institutions and governmental representatives from several states: Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam as they formalise their ethnic identity and nationality. When dealing with Vietnamese state officials they downplayed both the diasporic ethnic and religious dimensions of their identity and even over presented their connection with the host country. Nonetheless, they did not officially let go of their status as aliens and formally became Vietnamese citizens because they wanted to assimilate to Vietnamese society. On the contrary, they perceived it as a way to distance one self from actual Vietnamese cultural citizenship. Instead, they wished to fulfil an ethnic religious duty that cannot be actualized locally. *Đi hành hương* as the Bawean and Cham call the *hajj* is one of the 5 pillars of Islam. A loss of Islamic practice is seen as a loss of Baweanness.

The Bawean case study balances the view that some contemporary literature on the Vietnamese State generates. Current literature positions "motley crowds" on frontiers or in non-urban settlement areas, but this case study presents such a crowd that exists on the frontiers of formal classification while living in the centre of Vietnam's economic hub.

It also shows that official policies are not necessarily followed through on lower governmental levels. State agents did not force Mohamed into the existing formal or official classificatory grids in line with an oppressive uniform ideology. This shows that this ideology, suppressing diversity for the sake of the idea of a greater Vietnamese family, is not implemented the same way everywhere, without respect to regional or population variations.

Some scholarly literature presents state classification as a state's hegemonic instrument, as an instrument of state-power alone. However, ethnic classification is an instrument that is not used by the state alone. As shown above, when people feel the need they will decide to make use of such an instrument of power. In the past as well as in the case study presented above Mohamed has actively manipulated aspects of his ethnicity in response to his needs and the situations he has had to overcome. His feelings of ethnic pride have in the

past made him hold on to his ethnic identity choosing not to become a Vietnamese national. Later when he needed something the Vietnamese state could provide him, he manipulated state agencies while formally classifying his ethnic identity and in doing so he used ethnic classification as an instrument to his benefit. This provided him with a permit that enabled him to undertake a journey that in turn serves a non-instrumental, non-political element of his ethnic identity. In fact most of the people who received Vietnamese citizenship are in the autumn of their lives and they claim that this request for Vietnamese citizenship not only influenced their life in or their functioning within Vietnamese society it also was a preparation for life after death.

This pilgrimage provides him with a psychological feeling of security in the religious context of an afterlife. It soothes other emotions such as longing and answers the need for religious purpose and actualises his imagined membership to the *umma*. Cultural, historic and religious narratives and his religious explorations of the Internet have instilled these feelings in him. This case reveals how *Indonésia* has become a *dân tộc* and how Bawean men and women became an officially registered ethnic community in order to fulfil one of their last religious duties.

Another argument is that even after September 11, 2001 the Bawean were not investigated or restricted in any way. A reason might have been their (ex-) alien status or that the agents of the Vietnamese government just as current scholars do not consider the Bawean and others living in urban areas as a border or frontier “motley crowd” because of lingering geographical criteria (mountainous, close to national borders) for marginality.

Vietnamese State officials did not interfere in Bawean daily life. In the case of citizenship application, they even pro-actively helped them even though this Bawean citizenship case did not fit the existing legal formats as these only cater to people who already belong to a (foreign) country as citizens. State officials did not show the pre-occupation that citizens must belong to one of the fifty-four recognized groups with this affiliation shown on the identity card. They permitted ambiguity when they allowed the Bawean to choose their own ethnonym to be documented as their *dân tộc*, [ethnicity], on their *giấy chứng minh nhân dân* their identity card. Some state institutions seem to have let go of the standard grids and have accepted, up to a point people’s subjective ethnic identity as the official one.

List of Interviews

The author has established long-term relationships with several informants and some informants have been interviewed several years in a row.

interview with *hakim* of mosque Nuhr, July, 2001, Hồ Chí Minh City

interview with *Hidir*, June, 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

interviews with *Mohamed*, June 2001, Hồ Chí Minh City

interviews with *Mohamed*, May 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City

interview with lawyer at the Department of Foreign Affairs, November 2005, Hồ Chí Minh City